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**Review of: HUBER, Joerg / ZHAO Chuan (eds.) : A New Thoughtfulness
in Contemporary China. Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics**

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Aspects of Emotion in Late Imperial China



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Wenn zudem ausgeführt wird, dass Valignanos' Katechismus von 1586 als "record of the West's earliest encounter with Buddhist philosophy" (S. 60) anzusehen sei, so ist anzumerken, dass dies nur gelten kann, wenn die Antike aussen vor gelassen wird. In der Tat finden jüngste Studien zunehmend Belege dafür, dass bereits von der alexandrinischen bis zur spätantiken Zeit eine Rezeption buddhistischer Philosophie in Europa stattgefunden hat. Solche in Form von Superlativen formulierten Urteile bedürften in der Tat eine überzeugendere Begründung als die im Text zu findenden Andeutungen; da diese Urteile aber meist *en passant* vorgenommen werden, während der Text einen anderen Aspekt diskutiert, ist der Leser wohl gut beraten, diese Aussagen weniger als begründetes Urteil denn als Phänomen des Stils zu nehmen. Den umfassenden Darlegungen zur Rezeptions- und Konstitutionsgeschichte der Idee der "orientalischen Philosophie", die Apps Werk zu einer sehr lohnenden Lektüre machen, stehen diese Stilphänomene denn auch nicht im Wege.

Jens Schlieter

HUBER, Joerg / ZHAO Chuan (eds.): *A New Thoughtfulness in Contemporary China. Critical Voices in Art and Aesthetics*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2011. 232 pp., 53 images, ISBN 978-3837616651.

This ambitious collection of essays betrays a growing curiosity of western experts working in the fields of aesthetics, art and cultural studies as well as of intrigued audiences vis-à-vis contemporary Chinese cultural production. Anyone who wants to learn more about its core issues and broader contexts will find it timely, informative and thought-provoking. The selection of essays works along the paradigm of a self-reflexive turn in the agents' aesthetic outlook: away from the 1990s' outward orientation with its famous slogan of *zouxiang shijie* (going to the world) towards a kind of internal move, preceded by the literary *xungen* (root-searching) movement or, as the introduction puts it adequately, towards "self-positioning, the critical borrowing from tradition and, as a consequence, new structural analyses of present-day positions" (p. 7). In pursuit of this paradigm, the editors chose not to focus on the big names of the global contemporary art market (although there are some), but rather to invite curators, art critics, academic teachers, and performance artists from so-called Greater China (PR China, Hong Kong, Taiwan ROC) to think about ways to introduce a general audience of western readers to those aesthetic disciplines, themes and position-

ings that are highly esteemed and very influential within China, but have so far gone more or less unnoticed outside a sinophone cultural hemisphere.

In the four essays that constitute the first section of the book, questions tackling the dialogue between contemporary art and traditional *shu-hua* (literati calligraphy and water-ink) painting styles are addressed. Chang Tsong-zung introduces his readers to the traditional literati class, from which all court officials were recruited, and the important cultural as well as political functions these amateur artists fulfilled in imperial times. Chang argues that the social impact of contemporary New Wave artists and intellectuals as a critical class as compared to the cosmic role of literati is much inferior, and that the political commitment of the former *per definitionem* remains “outside the protected circle of power”. Moreover, “their manner of critique is confrontational, and often antagonistic, by necessity” (p. 22). Besides these issues of class and political power, Chang also tackles the question of key terms. Rehearsing the various modern names for the ancient aesthetic disciplines of calligraphy and painting, but also the desperate situation and impossible targets modern representational forms were supposed to address, Chang invokes the ancient Confucian concept of *zheng ming*. This notion indicates a ritual paradigm of adjustment to names, meaning that a person’s conduct should always correspond to the true significance of any given term. For example, *wang tianxia* is a concern for, and commitment to the cosmic world order, including a deep respect for liveliness, or nature, of the literati class. *Jiu wang*, on the other hand, signifies the intense, but in comparison rather myopic struggles of a declining dynasty/empire for survival. On a more personal level, concubines must not be addressed randomly as formal wives, strangers not with names indicating kinship relations. If a person – or worse, a community – is careless with words, the order of the universe can be in danger. Unfortunately, in this otherwise most enlightening introductory chapter on “Ink painting in the age of new wave”, this significant semantic background remains under-explained and its English rendition, “to find a suitable name,” is misleading in its post-modern arbitrariness.

Lu Dadong, both in his art and in the interview reproduced in this publication, explores the intersections of calligraphy, (rock) music, Shamanism and Zen Buddhism. In particular, he addresses the instantaneous performative quality of his art, comparing the multi-media installations he works with to the eccentric shows of some of East Asia’s most famous Buddhist *kuang cao* (wild cursive script) calligraphers, but also stresses the fact that this art is necessarily the outcome of a long, devoted technical training.

Kong Guoqiao and Chen Anying both engage with the role of traditional *shu-hua* aesthetics in modern, globalized contexts, but focus on different key concepts. For Kong, a comparative historical semantics of the modern notions of art – composed of the Chinese characters *yi* (arts, skills) and *shu* (technique) in the Chinese case – suggests that certain values and ideas that were relevant in the past can no longer meaningfully be employed under the conditions of modernization, which is why, according to him, we need to question the residual functionality of traditional aesthetic disciplines: “[I]s calligraphy becoming a ‘retain pattern’ like a ‘heritage’ while gradually losing its possibility as an art?” (p. 57) Chen, on the other hand, tackles the controversy between modernist (western) and conservative (traditional Chinese, East Asian) aesthetic approaches by means of a eulogy to the classical literati art of landscape painting. He revisits the entanglements of the former with the limitations of aesthetic realism and then envisions possible contributions of the latter to a future sustainable, planetary aesthetics:

Literati art is like Chinese gardens: it combines culture and nature within a restricted space. It is to be hoped that the modern study of literati art will not only enable us to reconnect with nature but that it will also enable us to reconcile modernity and tradition, modernism and culture. It is only by achieving this reconciliation that China can become a country that is pleasant, reliable, and an attractive place to visit and live in. (p. 70)

Among several hints at deep environmental concerns in contemporary aesthetic discourse throughout the book, this statement is the most straightforward and outspoken.

In the four essays of the second field of inquiry several legacies and key concepts of contemporary avant-garde and performance art are reflected. Wang Chunchen traces the politicization of aesthetic realism in a modernizing China during the Maoist years and the impact of this discourse on today’s cultural production. Qiu Zhijie illustrates his profound meditation on the meanings of cultural memory and commemoration by means of his long-term art project called “Monument series”. In an informal, *bitan*-style (pen-talk) dialogue, two artists from Taiwan and Mainland China, Chen Chieh-jen and Zhao Chuan, then elaborate on their different aesthetic approaches to contemporary realities in a comparative historical perspective, arguing that the two different (communist and anti-communist) societies developed their own, unique cultural forms and concerns that are however based on shared traditions and recent confluences, including a globalized contemporary consciousness. In his essay “The dismantling

and re-construction of *Bentu* ('This Land' or 'Native Land')," Gao Shiming criticizes the politicization and "consumerist prettification" of post-colonial concerns and theories, and demands a "much more complex and dynamic cultural production" in what he calls a 'global – *bentu*' (local, homeland) context (p. 109). Hinting at the cheerful, multi-cultural show staged by the London Olympic promotion team at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Gao argues that the critical vocabularies of post-colonialism with their key notions of hybridity and creolization have long merged with global capitalism, as they were seamlessly incorporated into its propaganda apparatus.

Threshold to a third focus on avant-garde conceptual art and photography, David Ho Yeung Chan's essay explains how conceptual artist Gu Dexin engages audiences in a relational aesthetics, which is expressed in provocative installations that open up "an opportunity for us to contemplate the brutality of senseless urban development" (p. 124) and "question our infatuation with progress and power with a sense of irony and playfulness" (p. 127). Following Chan's self-reflexive, inward observations, Wang Nanming contemplates the role of the global art market and juxtaposes 'token Chinese' artworks made for indiscriminating western eyes with 'critical art', by which he means engaged artworks that reflect the social realities of today's China in more honest, sincere and politically relevant ways. His unfavorable comparison between the lucrative, glamorous global art projects of New York-based 'token artist' Cai Guo-qiang and the considerably less 'marketable' local avant-garde artists, who are dedicated to exposing the alarming social problems of booming China's disenfranchised lower social segments, betrays this author's growing impatience with the unwillingness of western audiences of contemporary Chinese art to renounce the object of their consumption desires – an imaginary Chinese Other served profitably by the 'token artists' – and instead to turn to the much more painful task of deciphering the local artists' urgent messages. These latter have undertaken an austere rethinking of China's modernity but, following Zhu Qi's similar complaints concerning western audiences' stupendous ignorance of Chinese aesthetic legacies, "have not become well-known in the West as they do not directly express political rebellion or simplistically utilize Chinese symbols" (pp. 144 f.). Furthermore, the rebellious spirit of those groups who according to Zhu may have a lasting impact on China's future remains unidentified outside, because it does not adhere to western aesthetic expectations, and in particular resists the stock vocabularies of representational cynicism. Hence, two historical mistakes need to be corrected in order to retrieve "a new cultural universality from the Chinese

reality by way of Chinese methods” (p. 152), concludes Zhu: first, the abandonment of a Zen-inspired transcendence that allowed traditional artists to sublimate their feelings of pain or social concern into seemingly serene landscapes, where their tensions and stirrings could be inscribed in creative, hidden and subtle ways; and second, the abandonment of the traditional non-representational language in favor of the western realist mode, which locked up contemporary Chinese art in a western box. In fact, Zhu and several authors in this anthology argue convincingly that contemporary art is well on its way to resurrect these important aesthetic legacies.

Three essays by Jiang Wei, Dao Zi and Jin Feng conclude the section on conceptual art and photography. Pondering the differences between Pingyao and Lianzhou International Photo Festival (PIP and LIPF), Jiang Wei analyzes the role of ambitious international art events organized in remote Chinese locations in the national pursuit of promoting contemporary Chinese art. The spectrum of possibilities reaches from successful, innovative aesthetic projects and trajectories to the full absorption of critical art into global consumer culture. Dao Zi, himself one of the most thought-provoking conceptual photographers, traces the evolution of his aesthetic discipline and muses over the question of possible successors. Jin Feng provides an encyclopedic survey of the possibilities, expectations and desires related to the introduction of the internet in China, suggesting that major accomplishments may be gained on three levels – public participation, the artists’ self-management, and institutional innovation – through this new medium of communication.

In its final chapters, this collection of essays on contemporary aesthetic outlooks examines trends in Mainland Chinese experimental theatre. Tao Qingmei, regrettably without offering any publication or *mise-en-scène* dates, undertakes an overview of the most influential spoken drama plays since the Cultural Revolution and introduces two famous stage directors. Zhang Xian tracks down modern Chinese underground groups’ theatrical responses to the changes of the political climate, ironically suggesting that the political theatre of the People’s Congress continues an ancient tradition of ritual court ceremonies. He also likens this carefully staged, yearly spectacle to the monotonous revolutionary model opera invented by Mao Zedong’s fourth wife Jiang Qing and her allies during the Cultural Revolution. His repeated questions, “Can that be? Why can’t it be?” beat the rhythm of the text and come full circle when in the final image a growing group of people is imagined as breaking free from the tight thought control the modernizing state ritually exerts over its subjects.

In the concluding essay written by co-editor Zhao Chuan, six unique artistic interventions are reflected. The author insightfully relates these artworks to a set of corresponding key concepts that include the tortuous longing for a vanished, imaginary home (the old country) vs. the desire to free oneself from the shackles of an overpowering imagined community (nation), a contemplation of the altered meanings of kinship in contexts of extreme poverty and naked life in one of modern China's most affluent regions (zulei/clan, the ethnic), the search for transcendence in a nihilistic environment (faith), and finally the interrogation of the meanings of human nature in a society that is about to forfeit all moral standards (ethics, the world).

This mesmerizing publication introduces western audiences of contemporary Chinese artworks to some of the most interesting and dynamic artists as well as to the aesthetic principles, predicaments, subtexts and queries they engage with. This is no easy task, since very little knowledge about the (social, historical, philosophical, linguistic etc.) contexts can be presupposed. Also, one is tempted to contest some of the verdicts and judgments offered by the authors. Cai Guo-qiang, to mention just one example, is a successful global artist, but does his financial success imply by necessity that his art simply exploits the canon of symbolic Chineseness commercially and parasitically? What exactly, critical readers may also wonder, is *new* about the thoughtfulness the editors diagnose in contemporary Chinese aesthetic discourse? And a long-nurtured idiosyncrasy whispers: could it be that the persistent, orientalist idea that the west's *modern* thoughtfulness must pioneer the Chinese once again has managed to worm its way into this otherwise so refreshingly open-minded collection via an eye-catching title? Finally, the lack of a careful, informed editing of some of the English translations and the absence of a glossary might have a discouraging effect, which is however quickly forgotten in view of the other, quite excellent translations as well as the truly gratifying intellectual experience that awaits patient, dedicated readers.

Andrea Riemenschnitter